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ABSTRACT

Twenty conference participants shared their experiences regarding how each had become involved in a process where significant learning was taking place. After all the experiences (stories) were told, the group collected the insights they had gained. These 50 morals sounded like platitudes or cliches; they had very little power without their stories. There was no common theme throughout the stories, but four themes did recur with great frequency: (1) Many stories told of a personal struggle. (2) Often they were stories of people putting, or attempting to put, their passion into action. (3) They were stories of risk taking and of a willingness to intentionally face the unknown, the unfamiliar, and the unpredictable. (4) Very often they were stories of people deeply moved by their compassion and energized to act. For these educators, a discussion about education was an exploration of how to learn rather than how to teach. The power of storytelling as a teaching device was revealed as people shared their experiences, and it was obvious that this kind of personal sharing and teaching one another, so valuable as a way of exploring the human experience, can only happen among people who are willing to trust one another. A further lesson learned by the participants was that experiencing theories authenticates what one knows. Experiences make what a person already knows to be true (e.g., the 50 cliché-like morals), known at another level. (JB)

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Issues in
Education:

**Nontraditional
Approaches**

In this conference summary, the author endeavors to share a number of the valuable insights that emerged from the discussion of nontraditional approaches to education. This report is not intended as a statement of consensus since there may be numerous views and interpretations mentioned here that were not shared by all who were present.

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Insights into
Issues in Education:
**Nontraditional
Approaches**

A conference cosponsored by
The Stanley Foundation
and
Las Palomas de Taos

June 3-5, 1988
Taos, New Mexico

It was probably inevitable that people who would choose to take a chance on such a discussion would choose to do so in surprising ways.

This is the story of a very surprising conference, a conference on nontraditional approaches to education. Our conferences are usually followed by a fairly formal report, but the central role of storytelling in this particular event led me to share what I can about it in story form.

The conference brought together twenty educators from around the nation who had been invited because of their demonstrated interest in other than traditional modes of education. The conference invitation offered the following rather wordy description of the proposed discussion:

This conference will focus on an exploration of nontraditional approaches to education for living in the twenty-first century. Our discussions will proceed from the assumption that such nontraditional educational alternatives exist and are of value. This assumption may challenge the unconscious tendency of many educators to behave as if all education must ultimately originate from the public schools. We hope to look at the meaning and practice of education for the twenty-first century, unobstructed by the preconceptions imposed by the standard classroom and school context.

It was probably inevitable that people who would choose to take a chance on such a discussion would choose to do so in surprising ways. That is certainly what happened. For example, the conference started on Friday evening, and by Saturday morning participants had decided to discard the

agenda. This group who had become acquainted barely twelve hours earlier concurred in the decision without hesitation. The participants said they preferred to trust one another and the process of conversation. They were pretty sure that each person there could decide what they knew and wanted to share with the rest of the group and how to do so.

Early in the ensuing conversation, Ron said that he was very eager to hear how each of us now found ourselves involved in a process where significant learning was taking place. We all liked his question and agreed to take turns answering it. The result was a storytelling session which occupied the major part of our time together, taking a full day of a weekend (Friday night to Sunday noon) conference. Every hour or so I checked to be sure the group wanted to continue and was regularly reassured that they wanted to let people take the time they needed to share their messages.

After everyone's story had been told, we finished our discussion by collecting the lessons we had gained in our time together. The list of insights we identified were so true they sounded like platitudes or even cliches. I puzzled for quite some time about this. Why was the powerful, thought-provoking, and often deeply moving nature of our conversation missing from this summary?

I decided that the disparity arose from the power of the story or parable for teaching. As people spoke, we were profoundly engaged by one another's stories. We could imagine the experience and care for the storyteller, and we were reminded of much that we knew and had learned about life.

The insights we collected . . . had very little power without their stories.

The insights we collected, and there are dozens of them, were the morals that each of us had drawn; and they had very little power without their stories.

There was no common theme that ran throughout the stories, but there were four themes that recurred with great frequency. Many stories were of personal struggle. Often they were stories of people putting, or attempting to put, their passion into action. They were stories of risk taking and of a willingness to intentionally face the unknown, the unfamiliar, the unpredictable. And very, very often they were the stories of people deeply moved by their compassion and energized to act.

Now I can't tell you all of the stories. I can only share a few pieces of memory.

One of the first stories I remember is Loy telling of how a few of her friends who were struggling with a difficult political situation and feeling thoroughly defeated and victimized by it began gathering together, primarily for mutual support. Then she told how they began to take political action and how that action began to succeed. They were surprised to find themselves no longer victims, no longer the odd person out; in fact, they were accomplishing what they had hoped. And they were surprised to discover in themselves some resistance to this success — some unwillingness to relinquish the role of victim.

From this story I recall we learned that we

need to own our role and image as leaders who model a new and alternative way.

Along those same lines, I think of Ed's story of struggling with what seemed to him the unfair rules and norms of a big institution and of finally having to admit defeat in the face of such overwhelming power. When I remember that story and Pasha's story of a broken marriage and rebuilt life, I understand why we realized that sometimes a breakdown can be a breakthrough.

Jaimie told stories of two separate leadership chances, one when she chose to lead and led in the wrong direction and one when she chose not to lead when her guidance would have helped. She quoted from her father, "You never heard of a famous committee." I recall that we learned that pluralism means we are always one among many, that a willingness to be a good follower as well as leader can overcome the effects of egomania.

George's story of running from pain until he discovered that sometimes loving meant accepting heartache and Faye describing the struggles that led her to know that the central issue of life is the passionate nature and how to manage it reminded us that compassion is crucial to humanity's survival.

Diane described herself on her first morning in the Middle East looking outside and encountering a scene that nothing in her past experience had prepared her to deal with and thinking, "At last I'm somewhere else!"

Gary told of years of loving work with teachers and of his dream of "Eagle Vision" seminars where teachers could rise above their daily routines and take time for a

wider view — an eagle's vision — of their work. I still see Ron alone on a highway, surrounded by mountains, suddenly knowing a new course for his life.

After recalling these bits and pieces of our sharing, I look again at our list of insights and they are rich with meaning because I am reading them with my heart as well as my mind.

This tempts me to tell the whole list of insights because they've come to life for me once again. But I'll remember how they read cold, without the experience, and resist. Instead, I'll include just a few more of my favorite of the thoughts and ideas that were shared:

- Kids don't know geography but all kids know they live in a world that is not safe.
- We need to give people permission, space, trust, and respect — to support them to become who they are.
- The extended family is there; we simply need to introduce ourselves to each other.
- When the participants in our peace and justice seminars told us their hopes and fears, they essentially said, "Am I going to feel worse than I do now, after this event?"
- I see myself as an artist, not as a teacher.
- We all need to experience maximum exuberance.
- Everything that I've done that's important is important because it can't be institutionalized.
- Suddenly I knew that I simply wanted to talk to people about what they want to do in life.

- At last I realized that you can't change unless you are willing to go back to the source of your actions, your assumptions. That means you have to spend time learning to forget.
- In our program people don't feel threatened. If people are failing a lot, that shows there is a climate of risk.
- Failure is not inability itself; it is fear of risk.

So that's the story. And what morals can I draw? What did this conference teach me about nontraditional approaches to education?

These experienced educators chose to share stories, not of how they were gloriously succeeding as teachers but rather of how they were struggling, growing learners. For them, a discussion about education was an exploration of how we learn rather than how we teach.

Certainly I learned the power of storytelling as a teaching device. The stories engaged us because we could identify with them, and so they connected to our experience. They engaged us because they were deeply felt and, therefore, demonstrably true for the person telling them. And because they could engage our imagination and, therefore, our own experience of life, the stories taught in varied and subtle ways a multitude of lessons. They were particularly effective in exploring some issues that are usually very hard for people to deal with. Storytelling offered an opportunity for people to explore what it means to be human and to live life well.

For [participants], a discussion about education was an exploration of how we learn rather than how we teach.

The fact that we drew so many lessons from so few stories intrigues me because then what might have seemed like a slow and inefficient way of sharing ideas looks different. We listened to twenty stories — only twenty — but they produced more than fifty morals, insights, deeply felt learnings. Later as we listed the morals, we knew they weren't clichés; we knew where they connected to the stories we had shared. We believed the morals; we knew we had truly learned.

I learned that this kind of personal sharing and teaching of one another which is so valuable as a way of exploring the human experience can only happen among people who are willing to trust one another. We all had to assume that everyone there would be fair and honest and do the best they could to communicate.

Finally, I am struck by the fact that most of what I learned I already knew. At least I'd already claimed to know that storytelling was powerful and that trust helps people learn effectively; yet I was surprised when people put into practice what I had claimed that I already knew. It made me realize that experiencing theories, as I was experiencing mine in this conference, authenticates what I know. Experiences make what a person already knows to be true, known at another level.

This poem by Gary Howard especially touched the group, and they asked that it be included in the report.

THE MIND

The mind is your own seductive trickster
Giving comfort to desire and despair.
It will hide from you the truth and give
 illusion,
And make you think what you believe is
 really there.

If you want to know what's truth and not
 falsehood,
Look below your mind inside your fear and
 pain.
You'll discover there a truth beyond your
 reason,
You'll discover your heart's far wiser than
 your brain.

This simple truth is not what we've been
 learning
In our churches, schools, our colleges and
 books.
It won't help you gain wealth or worldly
 power
Yet it gives free joy to anyone who looks.

So give yourself a chance to live more fully;
Tone down your mind and open wide your
 eyes.
You already have the power you've been
 seeking,
It's been locked inside your limits and your
 lies.

Gary Howard
Shared at Las Palomas Conference
June 5, 1988

The Stanley Foundation

The Stanley Foundation works toward the goal of a secure peace with freedom and justice. Programs are planned, administered, and funded by the foundation, and all are focused on foreign relations and international education.

The foundation fosters involvement in world affairs through several different avenues, one of which is an extensive educator support program. Building on nearly twenty years of experience in the Muscatine, Iowa, schools, educator support now involves students and educators nationwide and concentrates on global themes through summer workshops, conferences, teaching aids, and program consultation.

Las Palomas de Taos

Las Palomas de Taos, a nonprofit educational organization, is centered in the historic Mabel Dodge Luhan house in Taos, New Mexico. This colorful setting at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo mountains hosts a tri-cultural community, providing visitors with unique living and learning experiences.

As an educational center Las Palomas sponsors a number of diverse learning opportunities, including workshops for educators, art experiences, elderhostels, youth adventure programs, seminars about the Southwest, and retreats. Las Palomas programs help people create positive ways of living with and valuing diversity and change.

Collaborated Efforts

The Stanley Foundation and Las Palomas de Taos frequently collaborate in their global education endeavors. Jan Drum of the Stanley Foundation and George Otero from Las Palomas codirect programming for youth and adults and write a twice-a-month teaching aid called *Teachable Moments* which addresses global themes.

Related Publications

Issues in Education: Youth Leadership. A 16-page summary of insights during a January 1988 conference.

Teachable Moments. Brief, thought-provoking classroom activities that address a global theme. Distributed free twice a month.

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